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Ireland's Agony, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"IRELAND'S AGONY," AT THE TEMPLE,
SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 5, 1920,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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I want to speak about Ireland this morning because I want to speak about one of the most magnificent struggles for human freedom that any nation can boast of. I am concerned about Ireland because I am concerned about freedom; because I believe in the spirit of nationalism; because I believe in the principle of self-determination, whether it is applied to the dominions of Great Britain or to the dominions of Austria.

I love to speak about this subject because the magnificent struggle for freedom which Ireland has carried on for over seven hundred years is incomparably the finest legacy of this fine race to humanity. The world is indeed doubly indebted to Ireland for it. The children of this great race have fought for human freedom perhaps on every battlefield of the world. I understand that thirty percent of the men who fought under Washington were Irishmen; but nowhere have they fought with greater valor and with less success than in Ireland itself.

I like to speak about them because Ireland is one of the few nations that, as a nation, has been providentially designated to suffer for an ideal. Every individual ideal-

ism has to suffer; that is the nature of an ideal and an idealist; but there are few people, as a people, called upon to endure ^{to} sacrifice for an ideal, and next to my own people I know of none that endured as much and suffered as much for the sake of the precious heritage of human freedom as has Ireland.

It is not so long ago when its suffering was actually physical; its suffering today is not physical. Conditions today are not what they were seventy-five years ago, when, between the years of 1845 and 1848, one and a half million of Irish men, women and children died of starvation, while food was being exported from Ireland to foreign markets by the absentee landlords of Ireland. Conditions today are not what they were between the years 1848 and 1855, when two millions of Irishmen were compelled to migrate and seek new homes, to become exiles from their native land. Conditions today in Ireland are different from what they were before the Land Purchase Acts were instituted, which put an end to the exploitation of Irish peasantry; which put an end to all the criminal abuse of absentee landlordism and the pauperism of the Irish peasantry.

Ireland today is comfortable and prosperous, and yet to a people that loves freedom as passionately as the Irish, today the yoke of foreign tyranny is just as galling and just as oppressive as physical suffering. The American Colonies did not revolt because they suffered physically;

they revolted because their primary and elemental rights as human beings were denied them.

I wanted you to feel as I feel--that the present disturbances in Ireland are not sporadic or unaccountable, or the workings of a few irresponsible agitators or propagandists, as propagandists would have us believe. What is transpiring today in Ireland is in direct continuity with a tradition of a thousand years of incessant, constant struggle for independence. Disaster could not crush them, and prosperity could not sadden their spirit. They fought the Norsemen in the Tenth Century as bravely and as determinedly as they fought the Normans in the Twelfth Century, and as they have fought the English since.

I do not want you to feel, as some of you no doubt do feel, that Ireland has heretofore been an integral part of the British Empire, and that it is only within recent years that it has begun to clamor for independence because of the revival of a nationalism sentiment or chauvinism among the Irish people. The Irish people, if my reading of history is correct, was never a willing partner to a union with England.

Ireland is geographically a unit; Ireland is racially a unit; Ireland is distinctive in its language, in its culture and in its history. Ireland was civilized long before England was civilized. Ireland became a Christian country in the Fifth Century, and when the Roman Empire was breaking up; when Spain and Italy were overrun by the Vandals

and Goths; when Gaul was overrun by the Franks; when Austria was overrun by the Huns and the Magyars; and when England was overrun by the Anglos, Ireland was a firm stronghold of culture and civilization, and from Ireland went forth missionaries to all parts of Western Europe. Learning and culture were kept alive in Ireland when Europe was passing through a frightful period of destruction, demoralization and a breaking up.

Ireland resisted England from the first day that England set foot on Irish soil, and Ireland called to its assistance every foreign foe of England to help drive England from its shores.--France and Italy and Spain and Holland were invoked by the Irish to help them fight the English. "Every foe of England was a friend of Ireland," and the English were always looked upon as invaders in Ireland, and for the seven hundred years that English rule existed in Ireland it wrote a ghastly record of cruelty, of persecution and crime.

Lest you think that I overestimate that, let me read you a sentence from the lips of the Prime Minister of England. In 1887 Gladstone said this: "There is no such record of failure in human affairs. Go where you would seek it, there is no such record of failure as in the treatment of Ireland by England for seven hundred years, during which time I may say there has not been seven hundred days, certainly not seven hundred weeks of content and satisfaction. Every horror and every shame that could

disgrace the relations between a strong country and a weak one is written upon almost every page of the history of our dealings with Ireland."

And a proud and gifted race, such as the Irish undoubtedly are, can scarcely be expected easily to forget seven hundred years of suffering and humiliation. It is well to speak of the oblivion of the past, and it is sometimes highly desirable for a people to let bygones be bygones, and Ireland has tried it more than once. As I say, it is very difficult for a sensitive and proud and gifted race easily to forget such iniquities as were perpetrated upon it as during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, concerning which Edmund Spencer said this:

"Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came, creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked like antinomies of death; they spake like ghosts cried out of their graves, and if they found a plot of water cresses or shamrocks, there they flocked to feast for a time. Within a short space of time there were almost no people left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly was left void of man and beast."

It would be very difficult for an Irishman to forget the horrors that were perpetrated during the reign of James I, when that iniquitous Act of Supremacy was survived, whereby no Catholic could hold office; whereby the act of uniformity was enforced; whereby every Catholic was compelled to attend a Protestant service on a Sunday

under pain of being imprisoned and fined; when land was seized and confiscated. Certainly, no Irishman could forget the curse of Cromwell when, in three years, the Puritans under Cromwell massacred, ravaged, exterminated tens of thousands of the flower of the youth of Ireland; when every insult that human ingenuity could devise was imposed upon the Irish.

I have sometimes spoken to you about the Yellow Badge that our forefathers were compelled to wear on their shoulders in the ghettos of Europe. Well, the Irish, too, had to endure the same contumely and insult. The Irish nobility had to wear a special garb to differentiate them from the English, and the Irish peasant had to have a black spot upon his right cheek to differentiate him from the Englishman,--everything to break the spirit of the people.

And it would be very difficult for the Irishman to forget the bloody year of 1798, when seventy thousand Irish were destroyed and whole counties were laid waste. It would be very difficult for him to forget the broken treaty of Limerick, and the rebellions of 1783, 1848, 1867, and even the rebellion of 1916. Yes, and it would be very difficult for him to forget the recent betrayals of his faith.

Those of you who are acquainted with Irish history know that since 1870 Irish statesmen endeavored to come to some sort of understanding with England. An attempt was made to let bygones be bygones--to forget the

past; and instead of demanding independence, an appeal was made to the English sense of justice for a very moderate and conservative form of home rule. The leaders of Irish thought of the last fifty years have endeavored consistently to bring the two peoples to an understanding. Gladstone, the Prime Minister, endeavored in 1886 to introduce a home rule bill,--a very modest affair. He was defeated. In 1893 he endeavored to reintroduce a bill. He was again defeated by the House of Lords. From 1893 on a campaign of education was carried on in England among the Liberals and the colony elements of England, endeavoring to make them see the justice of Ireland's claim for home rule, until in 1912 the Liberal cabinet under Asquith introduced a Home Rule bill. Previously to that, in order to destroy the veto power of the House of Lords, a bill was passed whereby any measure passed through the House of Commons in three consecutive annual sessions became a law in spite of the veto of the House of Lords.

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This Home Rule bill, by Asquith in 1912 was passed; it was passed again in 1913. And then the Tory element began its campaign to discredit the Home Rule bill. The Tory element in Ulster began to threaten; began to breath open defiance of the British government; began to insinuate that they would call in German assistance; began to import arms and ammunition; began to arm volunteers in Ulster; and in September, 1913, a provisional government was actually put up in Belfast with Carson at the head of

it. In spite of that the Home Rule bill was voted again in 1914 and was passed the third time and so became a law, and the Irish would have been content and satisfied with it, although it did not meet all their demands.

At that time there was no intention on the part of the Irish to demand complete independence. Six years ago only one Sinn Fein ran for office and he was badly defeated, but in December, 1918, out of 101 men elected 73 were members of the Republican party, or SimFeiners. That can only be accounted for by the frightful disillusionment on the part of the Irish.

This bill that was passed in three consecutive sessions, and had the indorsement of the British people, was shelved and forgotten as soon as the war broke out, and every demand to revive it was met with the threat, with the hostility of this small minority in Ulster; but in spite of the fact that the Home Rule bill was never enacted, when the war broke out in 1914, John Redmond, in the name of the Irish people, pledged the absolute and complete loyalty of Ireland to England for the duration of the war, and tens of thousands of Irish volunteered in the struggle.

But in 1915 a new coalition cabinet was formed, and Carson, the arch-enemy of Irish freedom--Carson, who threatened rebellion, and whose acts in Ulster in 1914 undoubtedly precipitated Germany's resolve to declare war, because Germany thought that the Irish was so divided among

itself, and that England was so desperately in difficulties that it would not dare to declare war upon Germany.--I say, Carson was made attorney-general of England; and the most important offices were obtained by the Unionists. The Irish realized then that their cause had failed; they realized that by constitutional means and methods they could never hope to obtain the thing which they had suffered for and struggled for for centuries.

And so in 1916 we have that tragic Easter rebellion.--on Easter Monday of 1916; tragic, like so many other attempts of the Irish to free themselves. These many attempts of Ireland to free itself, and these many failures, have brought a note of sadness and melancholy into Irish life. The songs of its bards are frequently dirges--songs of exile and of longing; and its imagination has been tinged with mysticism, which is the fruit of depression.

Since that rebellion of 1916 there has followed act upon act of stupidity and oppression on the part of England, reaching its climax in the Act of Coercion, of August, 1920, whereby Ireland was practically put under martial law, resulting in the arrest of hundreds and in the tragic death of MacSwiney. I suppose the practical people among us--and there are many of them--look upon the death of MacSwiney as something futile, something truly Irish in its impracticability.

I think the world has come to a sad pass when

it cannot admire in the fullness of spirit such an act as that of MacSwiney. It is true that it was not a practical act as we gauge acts by the measure of practicability, but it is such acts that made the history of the people glorious. And it is such acts that give to Irish history the glamour of romance and poetry and beauty. No martyr is a practical man. A few days ago I read of another impractical man on the part of a young man--a Mr. Garland, who refused to receive a legacy of a million dollars from his father, because he said he didn't earn it. He did not earn it. Practical people--men of the world, laughed at such naivete, such simplicity, such innocence. Why think of all the good the man could have done with that million dollars! Well, I venture to say that all the good that he might have done with that one million dollars is infinitely less than the good he has done by that splendid manifestation of devotion to a principle.

What the world needs today, my friends, is not money, and the salvation of humanity will not be achieved by millions. What the world needs is a new heart and a change of heart; and a youth like Garland, who is ready to turn his back upon the glitter and the glamour, and the comforts and the luxuries of wealth, and remain true to an ideal that no man is entitled to anything that he does not earn,--I think his example is worth more to the world than the good that his million dollars would have accomplished.

In other words, the demand for complete

independence on the part of Ireland is a direct result of the blundering and the blindness and the stupidity of English statesmanship; the same as the demand on the part of the Thirteen Colonies for complete independence was a direct result of that same blundering.

Now, much can be said about Ulster. I have great sympathy for the demand of Ulster for self-determination; but I frequently wondered how much of it has been artificially stimulated; I frequently wondered how much Ulster is suffering from a paternalism, from a pampering by England; and I frequently asked myself how much of that religious hostility, that religious animosity, of which so much has been made, has been artificially stimulated and kept alive, not for religious purposes but for political ends.

It is astounding how readily people invoke the religious passions of people for selfish and political and economic motives; and it is astounding how readily these passions may be invoked, and how furious and destructive they become when they are invoked. Two of the most delicate words of our language--"assassan" and "thug"--are derived from religious communities that killed for the sake of religion.

Ulster ought to be safeguarded and should be safeguarded, but it will be safeguarded under a republican form of government in Ireland. I think if anything can be said of the Irish to their eternal credit and glory, it is

this: that they have never persecuted people of another faith. Ireland is perhaps the only country on God's earth where the Jew has not been persecuted, and the small Protestant communities scattered through the south of Ireland have given testimony to the fact that they have never been molested; and there is no reason to think that when Ireland becomes independent that Ulster would suffer oppression.

I have heard a great deal of criticism about the Irish, principally from the mouth of the English. The Irish, they said, ~~are~~ are a shiftless race, are an impractical race, are a lazy and indolent people. You know, it is very characteristic of the English that any people they seek to dominate become ipso facto a backward people; a people that needs someone to carry the woodman's burden; a people that justifies England in assuming control of its destinies.

Now, I am not here to define and analyze the Irish character; I am not sufficiently acquainted with it except through my reading of Irish literature. Literature is an index to a people's soul, and the poetry and the drama of the Irish indicate a soul that is beautifully sensitive and fine to all the beautiful things of life; a soul that has that saving grace of mysticism; a people that has not lost imagination--the imagination that makes of the coarse and the crude realities of the world something infinitely more beautiful; a kindly people, a people self-

sacrificing--more helpful to others than it is to itself.

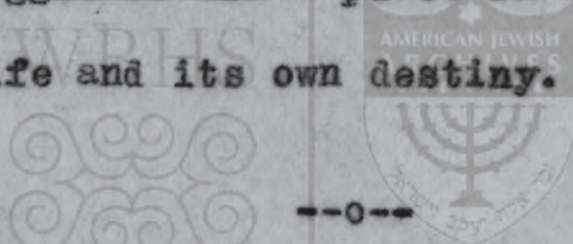
But if Ireland had defects Ireland could cure these defects only through the rigorous self-discipline and experiences of self-government. No people can grow, no people can develop intellectually, morally or spiritually unless it has an opportunity to live its own life and work out its own destinies, and falls and stumbles and falls again, to rise ultimately triumphant on the ruins of its experiences and past failures.

Perhaps some of the weaknesses that are attributed to the Irish people are due to this inability to express themselves in reality; the fact that they have been for centuries compelled to live in an artificial world of their own making, because the real world was denied unto them, just as it was denied to the Russian people. The best tonic for the Irish people would be independence.

I believe that Ireland will ultimately be free. I believe that a people that has such a holy passion for freedom cannot be permanently thwarted or denied; it may be that it will not gain complete independence this year or next year, or this decade or next decade; it may be that the magnificent struggle of the people today will result only in some form of a dominion rule, or even less; but it is to my mind an absolute fact that Ireland will ultimately become a free and independent people. No nation that has such heroic, self-sacrificing children as Robert Emmet and O'Connell, and no people that has such genius as that of

Swift and Goldsmith, and Moore, and Yeats, and Shaw, and Wilde, and Sinn, and Gregory, and no people that has fought so consistently, so heroically for freedom for a thousand years can be denied.

I believe that Ireland will bless the world in the future as it has in the past; I believe that it has many spiritual gifts to give unto the world; if the recent revival of Celtic drama is any indication, then the genius and the spirit of the Irish is just as potent and just as vigorous today as it was in years gone by; and I believe it is the dearest hope of men and women who love freedom and who admire courage to wish Ireland God-speed in its historic struggle to win a place in the sun, and control of its own life and its own destiny.



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